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**How to respond to reviewers’ comments: A practical guide for authors**

By [Cristina N.](https://www.languageediting.com/author/admin/)

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In February 2020, [*Nature* announced](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00309-9) that it would give authors the option to publish their referee reports and responses to reviewers. Though this change is only a trial for this journal, other *Nature Research* journals have opened the peer-review process. I applaud the effort of these and other journals to make peer review more transparent, and hope it will become a standard.

Whether you publish your referee reports with your paper or not, how you respond to reviewers’ comments on submitted articles is essential to publication.

This guide can help you prepare well-crafted **letters to reviewers**.

**The right mindset drives the right response**

Before you respond to reviewers’ comments, celebrate that your [research paper](http://www.languageediting.com/research-paper-outline-template/) was sent to peer review. And be grateful that the reviewers carved time out of their schedules to evaluate your work for free.

Getting a harsh reviewer is possible, but it doesn’t happen often. Most reviewers are helpful and offer constructive criticism, but they don’t waste much ink praising the manuscript.

While a helpful review summarizes the major positives and details the negatives of a manuscript, in general, most reviewer comments are negative. Or, you’ll perceive them as negative. This doesn’t mean your paper has more weaknesses than strengths. It means that the reviewer has to detail your paper’s limitations, as these—not its strong points—need to be addressed by your revision.

**Revise the manuscript before you respond to reviewers**

When you’re ready to deal with the reviewers’ comments in a professional, objective manner, discuss the peer review reports with your co-authors.

Decide which changes to accept and which to rebut, revise the paper, and only then start writing your responses to reviewers.

**Responding to reviewers’ comments**

* Begin by **thanking the reviewer** for taking the time to assess your manuscript.
* Then, specify that you’ve **addressed** all the concerns they raised. Addressing a reviewer’s comment doesn’t mean you made the change the reviewer suggested. It means that you’ve considered it and either made the change or explained why you chose not to.
* List all the **reviewer’s comments and your answer** to each one. Use a different font or color to highlight your responses. This makes the text easier to scan.
* Avoid giving **yes or no answers**. Even if you’ve been asked to make minor changes, such as correcting a misspelled word, say “We’ve corrected the typo.” If it’s a more serious mistake, you may also add “We apologize for our error.”
* Whenever possible, make your responses to reviewers **self-contained**. The reviewer or editor shouldn’t have to peruse the manuscript to find a change you made. So, instead of “We’ve made the change. See page 5, line 24 of the revised paper”, write “We’ve changed [original text] to [edited text] (page 5, line 24)”. But if you rewrote an entire paragraph or section, respond, “We have revised the text to address your concerns and hope that it is now clearer. Please see page 5 of the revised manuscript, lines 9–20, and page 6, lines 1–20.”
* Do not omit any concern raised by a reviewer. You should **address each and every comment**—either make the change or reject it and justify your choice.
* **Pick your battles wisely:** Even if you don’t agree with a **minor change** suggested by a reviewer, it’s usually easiest to just make the change. It shows you’re open to suggestions.
* Be **tactful** when explaining why you disagree with the reviewer. To support your argument, you may use [supplementary material](https://www.springer.com/gp/authors-editors/journal-author/revising-your-paper-and-responding-to-reviewer-comments/1422), such as figures and tables, that you won’t include in the manuscript.
* When a [reviewer fails to understand](https://academic.oup.com/clinchem/article/57/4/551/5621037) a point you made, don’t assume they’re ignorant. If they failed to understand something you wrote, you’ve failed to express your idea clearly, and you confused at least one reader. So, it’s likely the text needs [**editing**](http://www.languageediting.com/should-i-edit-my-own-research-paper/) **for clarity and logic**. (Related post: [*What to do if the journal editor recommends English language editing services*](http://www.languageediting.com/what-to-do-if-the-journal-editor-recommends-english-language-editing-services/)).
* Respond to each referee as if they were the **only reviewer** of your paper. Do not respond to one reviewer with “Please see our answer to comment 34 of Reviewer #2”.
* End the letter to the reviewer with a sentence such as, “We would like to **thank the referee again** for taking the time to review our manuscript.”

**How to reply to peer review comments when submitting papers for publication**

The length of a response depends on the complexity of the question. I’ve edited two-page letters to reviewers, and I’ve edited 30-page letters. A letter to a reviewer should be as long as it needs to be to allow you to prove you’ve considered the criticism you received.

**When you agree with a reviewer**

This is the simplest case. Acknowledge your mistake and confirm you’ve corrected it.

Examples:

* We thank the reviewer for pointing this out. We have revised
* We have removed
* We agree and have updated
* We have fixed the error
* This observation is correct. We have changed
* We have made the change. The new sentence reads as follows

**When you disagree with a reviewer’s comment**

Choose your words carefully when drafting your response. First, emphasize any part of the reviewer’s comment you agree with. Then explain why you chose not to make the change.

Examples:

* We agree with the reviewer that further elaborating on this point using new data would be helpful. However, we believe that expanding our dataset is neither feasible, given the costs involved, nor would significantly support our argument. For this reason, we chose not to make this change, but we added the following sentence to paragraph 3 in the discussion: “Though having a larger dataset would offer further insight…”.
* We apologize if our original Figure 2 did not show…. We did not intend to…. We have modified the figure and hope that it is now clear that…. We believe that adding a new figure, as the reviewer suggested, would be unnecessary given that our new Figure 2 shows….
* We appreciate the reviewer’s insightful suggestion and agree that it would be useful to demonstrate that…; however, such an analysis is beyond the scope of our paper, which aims only to show that…. Nevertheless, we recognize this limitation should be mentioned in the paper, so we added the following sentence….

In sum, whether you agree or disagree with the reviewer, aim to prove that you understood their comments and took them seriously.

**What to do when reviewers disagree**

When reviewers give you **conflicting suggestions**, don’t respond, “As another reviewer suggested the opposite, we didn’t change the text”. Make a decision. Pick the suggestion you agree with and justify your choice to the other reviewer.

For example, you may say [something like this](http://www.ilr.uni-bonn.de/agpo/courses/pw/Cummings_et_al_reviewers%20comments.pdf), “As we received conflicting advice from another reviewer, we decided to make the change they suggested, because…. We hope this was the right decision.”

**How to respond to reviewer comments—journal examples**

Here are some examples of **letters to reviewers**. Note that the authors who rejected a reviewer’s suggestion provided a valid justification:

* <https://authors.library.caltech.edu/64174/4/ncomms12396-s2.pdf>
* <https://www.cs.sfu.ca/~haoz/pubs/zhang_cgf09_review_response.pdf>
* <https://www.bmj.com/sites/default/files/attachments/bmj-article/pre-pub-history/Second_response_18.5.15.pdf>
* <https://perso.citi.insa-lyon.fr/rstanica/reviews/answers1.pdf>
* <https://static-content.springer.com/esm/art%3A10.1038%2Fs41467-020-14449-z/MediaObjects/41467_2020_14449_MOESM1_ESM.pdf>
* <https://static-content.springer.com/esm/art%3A10.1038%2Fs41467-020-14661-x/MediaObjects/41467_2020_14661_MOESM2_ESM.pdf>

To find other examples, check the journals that publish the correspondence between authors, reviewers, and journal editors.

**Responding to reviewers: Advice from the perspective of a language editor**

When you respond to reviewers’ comments, maintain a **positive attitude** and **be open to criticism**. Your responses will tend to reflect your attitude at the time of writing. Word choice, tone, syntax—they may all reveal to the reader your true colors.

I’ve edited letters to reviewers that conveyed the message that their authors did not welcome criticism to their manuscripts. Their tone was overly formal, the sentences too short, and the examples few. These letters needed [editing](http://www.languageediting.com/editing/) for style to make them sound more like a discussion between professionals than a court defense.

And I’ve edited other letters that showed the author genuinely appreciated the reviewers’ comments. The authors of these letters used a positive tone, and their language was less formal and more conversational.

In my experience, the letters in the first category tend to be much shorter than those in the second, and maybe it’s not just a coincidence.

Responding to reviewers can seem like a chore, as nobody likes their work to be criticized. But if you see the reviewers’ comments as an **opportunity to improve your research paper** and get credit for it, responding to reviews will feel less burdensome.

**Do your letters to reviewers need editing? Send me a message at editor@languageediting.com**



**About Cristina N.**

A freelance editor and writer with a keen interest in science, nature, and communication, I love to craft articles that help and inspire people.